

TIMBU WARA FIGURES FROM PANGIA, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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This paper discusses wickerwork figures known as *Timbu Wara*, formerly made in the Pangia area of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. The paper sets the historical context of the described figures. The figures were associated with a fertility cult periodically celebrated with large sacrifices of pigs. Wickerwork figures of this same general kind are known also from the neighbouring Kewa and Enga areas. After the cult was abandoned in the 1960s people began making the figures for sale to tourists.

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INTRODUCTION

The wickerwork ritual objects that we describe here were manufactured in the Pangia area of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (Fig. 1). The name Pangia was originally given to a single small locality south of Mount Ialibu in the Wiru language area. The Wiru language is related to a set of neighbouring languages in the Highlands which includes those of the Enga, Huli, Mendi and Kewa peoples (Wurm 1964). Among these languages, Wiru appears as a Family-level isolate, less closely related to the others than they are related among themselves (Wurm & Hattori 1982).

The first non-New Guinean outsiders to go through the wider area were the gold mining prospectors, Michael and Danny Leahy, during the 1930s. In the late 1950s government officers selected Pangia for their station after the first patrol outward from Ialibu. Catholic and Lutheran missionaries arrived shortly thereafter and set up stations at Yaraparo and Tiripini in the close vicinity of the Pangia government station. Other missions followed—the Evangelical Bible Mission (at Mele) and the Wesleyans (at Takuru). Also, a linguist with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Harland Kerr, came to live in the area at Poloko (Borona) where he studied the language and social practices of the people (Kerr 1975).

Relatively little has been published about the Pangia people. Jeffrey Clark, who worked in Takuru village, has written a number of articles about the impact of colonialism and Christianity on the people and his book *Steel to Stone*, which

brings together and synthesizes the content of these articles, has been posthumously published (2000). (For further materials on the Wiru see Strathern & Stewart 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Stewart & Strathern 1999a, n.d.).

The Wiru are horticulturalists and pig-keepers and their staple crop is the sweet potato. The area has little primary forest and is mostly grassland and regrowth, dotted by limestone outcropping and sinkholes. This landscape has figured greatly in local notions of sorcery and spirit beings that were thought to live around settlements (Stewart & Strathern 1999b). In the past, long houses were built, through the initiative of male leaders, for important pig-kill ceremonies (Strathern & Stewart 1999a).

Pangia is encircled on three sides by mountain ranges. During the 1960s and much of the 1970s, travel into and out of the area was difficult. This remained so until the building of the Ialibu–Pangia road during the 1970s. Further, the Wiru traditionally had only minor trading and exchange links with non-Wiru peoples. Thus the impact of the colonial government and Christian missionaries was more extreme in a number of ways than in other regions where there had been more historical contact and interaction with other Papua New Guineans (Clark 2000; Strathern 1984; Stewart & Strathern n.d.). In particular, colonial control came to Pangia late, some 30 years after first contact in areas to the north such as Ialibu and Hagen, and the Administration attempted to bring about a swift set of social transformations and bring to the area the same ‘developments’ as were established elsewhere.

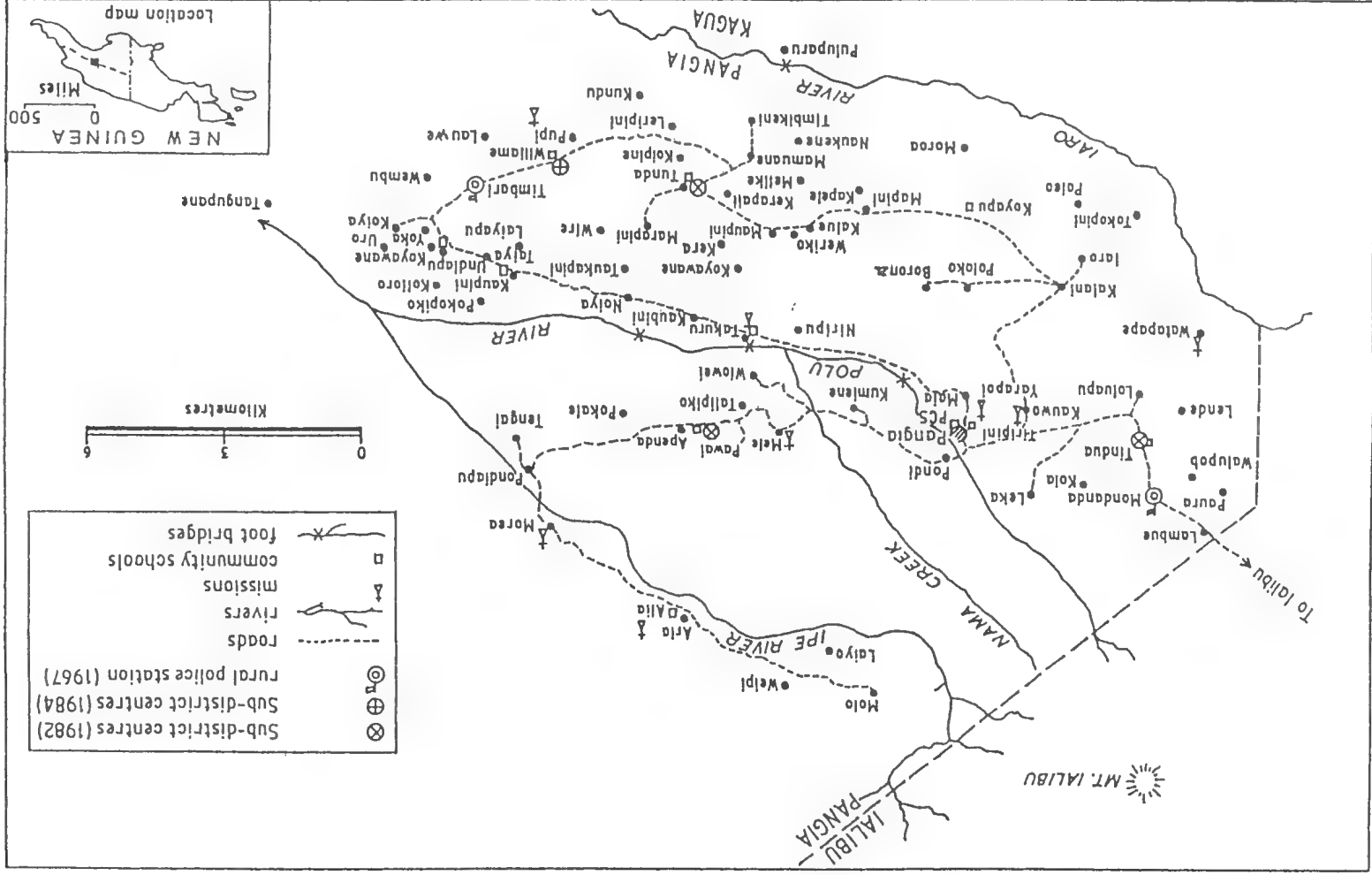


FIGURE 1. Map of the Pangia District, Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea.

Prior to 1960, the Wiru had little experience in interacting with the colonial power. Non-New Guinean outsiders were said to have perhaps come from rivers (*uele nekenea*) because of their white color; hence their resemblance to spirit beings known to the Wiru people already. They were also referred to as 'red men' and 'spirits from the sky'. Non-New Guinean outsiders were seen as desirable and powerful entities since they were thought to have abundant wealth items. One way in which the Wiru adjusted to their presence was to make them feel, to some extent, as though they were insiders, thereby 'domesticating' them into the local transactional framework. They were identified as the wealth people, the people with possessions, as elsewhere in the Highlands also. This engendered a desire in the Wiru to obtain these possessions by whatever trading means were accessible to them. But the colonial powers had an agenda of 'development' that was not in harmony with the 'traditional' means of sociality familiar to the Wiru.

The colonial administration required people to work as labourers on road projects and government buildings and to seek permission to hold pig-kills which might disrupt road work schedules. There was a great push to bring Pangia up to the 'development' level of other, longer-contacted areas of the Highlands. Thus the Administration reduced the time that the people had to adjust to these outside pressures which had come into their lives. Since the missions had come into the area on the back of the colonial government, the Wiru in some ways conflated the two and their expectations of what would eventually be obtained by participating in 'development' projects and mission activities was very great indeed, escalating with every passing year.

Initially, the Administration regarded various 'traditional' practices as a hindrance to 'development' in the area and some of the missions labelled 'traditional' cult practices as satanic. This was particularly true of the Evangelical Bible Mission and the Wesleyans. The Wiru had accepted Christianity into their pantheon of cults as a powerful new practice that might assist them in obtaining the good health and wealth that they thought the non-New Guinean outsiders possessed. Christian missions did bring schools into the area, which many even today remember as a positive change. In 1999, a middle-aged Pangia man from Wiliame village told us that he had appreciative memories of the missionaries, saying that 'they brought schools,

roads and teaching about hygiene' which he felt allowed him to have a better life and his children to become educated and earn money.

But some missionary workers, notably indigenous evangelists, also ordered the smashing of cult stones and the burning of cult houses—a practice also followed in other areas of the Southern Highlands such as among the Duna (Strathern & Stewart 1998; Stewart & Strathern 2000). Before the coming of the missions, the Wiru held pig-kills in association with a number of religious cults: *Timbu*, *Tapa* and *Aroa Ipono* (Strathern & Stewart 1999b; Stewart & Strathern 1999a). These cults all aimed at bringing health and fertility to the people and involved the construction of specific ritual objects and buildings. The *Tapa* cult centered on ancestral stones belonging to subgroups in each settlement area, and had to do with sacrifices of pigs made on occasions of sickness. The *Aroa Ipono* belonged to a widely spread complex of such cult forms, also found in the Western Highlands Province.

THE TIMBU CULT

The *Timbu* cult involved the construction of a specific cult house, which contained a central post (*tungi*) onto which were attached the shoulder and jaw bones of many pigs that had been killed over the years prior to the culmination of the festival. The cult's cycle of enactment was approximately five to eight years, ending with a great feast in which hundreds of pigs, the raising of which involved innumerable hours of female labor, would be killed. Prior to the pig-kill and ceremonial exchange marking the end of the cult cycle, the cult participants would dance around the *tungi* post holding the *timbu wara*. Subsequently, the *tungi* post would be taken out from the cult house to the ceremonial ground where the pig-kill and ceremonial exchanges took place. This would be in the area of a main village (*tumbea ta*) where cult houses of various kinds were located.

The *Timbu* cult was aimed at restoring ecological balance and fertility to humans, pigs and the land. The cult looked outward and brought together clans from other neighbouring districts, reinforcing continued exchange relations. It also may have functioned to redress exchange imbalances and outstanding debts that arose from warfare deaths (Dosedla 1984). The term *timbu* means 'sky', so the cult may have had a

connection also with mythical Sky Beings who are seen as important in other Highlands cosmologies. A comparable cult complex known as *Timb* is found in the Mendi area (Lederman 1986).

The cult involved various male age and status grades. Prior to the cult's culminating pig-kill, the participants would receive lengths of sugar cane that demarcated the quantity of pork they would subsequently receive. Although only males were allowed into the cult house, females participated in the production of the foodstuffs for the festival and the pigs for the feast. They also had the highly significant role of carrying back to their respective settlements the pork received at the ceremonial distribution.

Central to the whole process by which a *Timbu* performance was organised was the sacrifice of large numbers of pigs over a period of time, so as to provide bones to festoon the central pole. Informants agreed that marsupial bones would also be attached to the pole; some declared that the bones of rats and eels were also used. There were probably local variations in this regard. The overall purpose was clearly to show how many animals had been sacrificed to the spirit. When the pole was covered with bones, it was said that 'it is ripe' (*nondokako*), that is ready for the climactic phase of the cult. Men and boys were the ones who entered the tall house in which the 'bones pole' was kept. Older men were in an inner circle, with younger men at their back. A ritual specialist made spells for health and fertility, which were said to come up from his stomach, his *tepe*. For each cult house there was a single leader who held the knowledge of these spells and was therefore said to be the man in charge of the cult site (*yopikango*). Such a position of leadership and knowledge might be passed from father to son. But the knowledge could also be passed on between specific lines of descent within the larger residential complex of the settlement.

Joint participation in the cult was a mark of unity; separate performances later would mark social processes of differentiation over time. Two performances might be held in the same place, then a shift would occur. Clearly the *Timbu* represented the ongoing social life of a named group and its diachronic extension and alteration.

The exclusion of women and young children from the inner cult area does not mean that the *Timbu* was an exclusive 'men's cult'. The whole purpose of concealing the post and festooning it with bones was so it could be brought out later and displayed to the community at large, when the

final dance for the 'coming out' of the pole was staged. One senior informant said that 'after this the young men could find wives for themselves'.

The parts of pigs that were taken inside the cult house for consumption were the tail-joints (regularly used in ritual contexts elsewhere in the Highlands, such as among the Duna of the Lake Kopiago area) and the sides. The inner parts, including the entrails, and the heads of the pigs were given to the women to eat. A woman would dance up to a 'fence' and hold up a pig to be killed. The men rushed at it calling out and clubbing it as it squealed. The women then stood at the fence and received their portions of the pig to cook. When the 'bones pole' was finally buried at the end of the performance, both men and women were said to have participated in this final ritual act.

The *Timbu* spirit was said to be male—*ali*, 'a man'. The bringing out of the pole was therefore like the bringing out of a male initiate from a condition of secrecy into one of display. Prior to this moment of display in the ritual process, women and children should not see the pole because if they did so, their legs, arms and vaginas would suffer from sores described as 'scabies'. That is, if they saw the *Timbu* when it was 'unripe', the result would be the opposite of the effect of showing the spirit to them when it was 'ripe', like a mature, healthy man.

The *Timbu* also presided over marsupials. If hunters failed to find marsupials in the forest they would attribute this to the spirit. Hence the point of hanging trophies on the pole as a sign of hunting success—these were both a return to the spirit for granting access to the game and a demonstration to the community of this access.

The spirit was said to dislike pigs' heads because pigs spoil people's gardens. If the *Timbu* saw pigs' heads it too would spoil gardens in the same way, it was declared. We see here a sign of the latent aggressiveness believed to be inherent in the spirit.

Other taboos were observed. The participants made small flutes and blew these to warn women and children not to look when cult paraphernalia were being carried into the house. The flutes were blown also when pork was cooked and divided out in the cult place, to prevent sickness in people and pigs. These flute sounds were said to imitate the calls of two marsupials known as *tekelepo* and *wapenge*, which came 'along with the *Timbu* cult itself', it was said. The marsupials' call of *tu-li*, *tu-li* inspired the flute-blowers to imitate them. The spirit's connection with the forest and its

game is reaffirmed in this detail, while the act of blowing the flutes links the cult to a wide spectrum of such practices in the Highlands region as a whole.

Finally, the cult's forest associations are shown in the practice of roofing the cult house with wild pandanus leaves and black palm thatch, into which pig bones were pushed. White and rusty brown forest leaves were used to decorate the house; these also appear as decorations on houses for spirit cults in the Hagen area north of Pangia. We are dealing here with the fluid transmission of cult elements from place to place, in which forest associations are a constant feature.

After the performance was over, the pole and all pig bones were carefully buried. At the burial site the participants planted a *kendo*, a cordyline shrub, as a long-lasting marker, surrounding the shrub with boards. (This would make them like the *pokla mbo* which marked *moka* events in the Hagen area.) It seems likely that the *kendo* marked the place where the spirit and its power was now located in a dormant mode. The actual dance for the culmination of the ritual activities also involved wearing tall cordyline sprigs as bustles at the back. Pairs of men danced facing each other with their bustles bouncing at their backs, singing songs to the *Timbu*. The dance was called *polo pendeko*, 'the bending dance'. Men cut a pandanus leaf and blew musical notes on it as they performed it.

The *timbu wara* wickerwork figures which are the focus of this paper were made to be worn on the heads of the male dancers who participated in the climactic phase of the cult. We quote here initially two statements in 1967 by senior knowledgeable male informants of two different settlement areas in the southern part of the Wiru speaking area:

We make a figure of a man with rope and decorate it. When we kill the pigs we carry it on our heads. We put tall cordyline sprigs in our rear bustles and we carry bows and arrows. (Longai of Tunda village)

We made a *wara*, like a man, and placed it on our heads. This was a good custom; it was our own. If this figure was not made, pigs, men, women, and children would all become sick. We killed a pig [as a sacrifice before constructing the figures] and we made a 'picture' [*yomini* in Wiru] of the spirit. One special kind of rope and one special liana were used to make the *wara* and we carried them on our heads at the time of cooking pigs. Women could not hold these *wara*, only men and their sons ...[After the performance was over] some *wara* were buried,

but some were kept. Out of fifteen, maybe ten were buried but five were kept. For the next performance we made new ones and finally buried the remaining old ones. But now all the *wara* have been thrown away. The Lutheran Mission men cut up the *wara* with their axes. (Kuluwa of Marapini village)

Another old ritual expert noted:

In the past we made gardens of taro, bananas, sweet potato, and they all grew big. Now that we have given up the *Timbu* our crops are small. In the past pigs and men were large because of the *Timbu*. Now they are small. (Wipai of Tunda village)

In spite of this tone of regret, shared by many others at the time, the *Timbu* cult had vanished from the Wiru area by 1967. In several instances it was reported that the *yopikango* of the cult had himself turned in its sacred stones to the missions or had declared that it would not be performed again. Since he was the authorized expert for the group, his decision could not be challenged. Such men were afraid of the messages of Hell and sin that the missions brought with them. When asked if the people could themselves have cut up the *wara* and destroyed them, informants unequivocally said 'No, we could not have done this, because we were sorry (*ela toka*) for the *wara*.'

In Tunda village in 1967, an effort was made to collect a number of these wickerwork figures used in the *Timbu*. Tunda village had a road into it, making access somewhat easier although the road was often barely passable to vehicles. The people were converted to the Lutheran and Catholic forms of Christianity, and the settlement itself was artificially structured through the actions of the government bringing previously separate small settlements together (Strathern 1984; Stewart & Strathern n.d.). Tunda was, however, a traditional *tumbea ta* or 'big place', functioning as a ritual and political centre for surrounding hamlets. Some villagers at this time still possessed the knowledge of how to make the wickerwork figures called *timbu wara*, even though the *Timbu* cult was no longer practised.

The Lutheran Mission in the area was very active, as was the Catholic mission. Tunda was divided between these two. Hageners from the Western Highlands were working with the Lutherans at this time, and these Hageners boasted that they were involved in removing the ritual cults of the local people. But the actual time period since the arrival of Christianity, and the changes associated with it, was short; thus,

the people still retained a great deal of knowledge about previous religious activities such as the *Timbu* cult, although they were sometimes reluctant to discuss these in any detail.

THE *TIMBU WARA* AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

Timbu wara ('the spears of the *Timbu* spirit') were very striking wickerwork figures known from only a few areas of the Southern Highlands. As indicated above, these figures were made specifically for a particular cult performance and then buried or allowed naturally to decay. They would not have been kept indefinitely, so there were no heirloom examples that one could purchase for a museum collection. Even if some had been retained in the past, the missionaries had ordered the people to destroy or burn any remaining items from their pre-Christian religious practices. Therefore, a request had to be made to the people to manufacture some of these figures for a collection to be sent to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge.

Several local youths agreed to make them for a set fee. They were sons of men who had the right to wear such items in the past and there was no bar to learning from their fathers how to make them. In the past, these items were not made by the ritual experts, whose power lay in their knowledge of spells for the cult.

When the completed figures were presented they were placed vertically on top of the heads of the craftsmen to show how they had been worn in their ritual context. They were shaped like a human figure but they represented the *Timbu* spirit. At the time of presenting the figures, their makers carried them in this displayed manner through the village, which was close by a government road. At the moment that this parade was occurring, a local fundamentalist missionary from the Evangelical Bible Mission at Mele was walking along the road from Mamuane village, where he wanted to set up a mission station. The missionary's baggage carriers pointed at the men with the *timbu wara* figures and began to yell out, 'Satan, Satan, Satan figures are coming!' They were told that these were not Satan figures but rather artifacts that were commissioned to be made for a collection and not for any religious purpose, but these men were very afraid and went off. The missionary himself was rather upset and also

went off without any further discussion of the objects.

Ironically, this missionary later did subsequently set up a church in Mamuane village with the stated aim of bringing into congruence Christian ideology and aspects of indigenous culture. But in the course of doing this it was reported that he made a number of transactions in which the people felt they had not obtained enough in return for services rendered and they took revenge by burning the mission station down, forcing the missionary to leave.

The *timbu wara* figures were, as we have noted, objects made to celebrate the action of dancing for the *Timbu* spirit during the cult performance. The central ritual objects of the cult were items (which could include, for example, a tree fungus which was hard and stone-like and was called *timbu kapa*) that were kept in the specially constructed cult house, and pigs were sacrificed to these items. One of the senior men, who had himself been a custodian of the cult, explained further some of the ritual actions that were performed:

Inside the house they dug a hole and they made *man* [magical spells] over it. They used a pearl shell to scoop out this hole, speaking a spell over it also. Inside the cult house they planted tree saplings. They killed pigs and filled blood from them into a bamboo tube. They also took tree oil and poured it along with the blood into the hole. They took a special leaf, *timbu yombolu*, and buried it in the hole with the oil and blood. For every action they made a special *man*, including the house-building. When we had killed the pigs we made a special net bag, *tetaleme ka*, like a woman's net bag, made from rope, which we carried outside. The axes we used to cut this rope in the bush and to cut the wood for the house were all bespelled in advance. We used four different sorts of wood for the actual pole on which we hung the pigs' bones and also the bones of eels and marsupials. These woods were *tungi*, *lepa*, *walea*, and *pokota*. (Kuluwa of Marapini village)

This quotation gives some idea of the complexity and diversity of the ritual acts performed inside the cult house. The action of giving tree oil to the ground also parallels the Hagen male spirit cult sequence in which *Camptosperma* oil is poured into the 'spirit's eye' (see Stewart & Strathern 2001: 99–112). The *wara* in a sense marked the successful performance of these other acts: the creation of the spirit as 'a man' (*ali*), representing the regeneration or revivification of the community itself. The fact

that *wara* figures, like the 'bones pole', were all buried does not mean that they were casually discarded. Burying items in the ground is a way of preserving and containing their force, as is

abundantly testified from all over the Highlands. Since the pole was buried at a site where a *kendo* or cordyline was planted as a marker of group identity, we may reasonably suppose that the *wara*



FIGURE 2. These two boys are displaying decorations they have been involved in making to demonstrate the methods of manufacture of *timbu wara*. The boy on the left wears one figure attached to his head and holds another in his hand. The boy on the right wears an *alipo* wig with a set of bird plumes mounted on bamboo pieces above it as a headdress. The *alipo* wig style belongs especially to the Ialibu area north of Pangia. The house in the background is a newly made house for cooking food, beside a large dwelling house.

were buried in the same place. Elsewhere in the Highlands, ritual items were left to decay or were buried, for example the *gerua* boards or painted plaques found from the Wahgi area eastwards to the Siane (O'Hanlon 1989: 102ff.).

At this historical moment, in the 1960s, the

fundamentalist Christians from one of the missions were saying that these *timbu wara* objects were 'satanic' and should be destroyed. But the Lutherans and Catholics of the village were not making this a particular issue. The Catholic priests of the Capuchin order in the area



FIGURE 3. A close-up of the *timbu wara* figures.

had even used these objects to decorate their own houses and encouraged people to make them as tourist objects so as to obtain some income. By suggesting the objects be used as tourist items they were also deflecting the people away from associating them with the ritual itself.

THE TIMBU FIGURES

Figures 2-4 show the designs of the two figures that were constructed for sale in 1967 in Tunda village. The two boys were those assigned to carry the objects and who had been involved in their



FIGURE 4. Rear view of the *timbu wara* figure attached to the bast lining of an *alipo* wig, along with feather decorations mounted on rattan.

making. Both figures were flat constructions with protrusions representing arms and legs; they were coloured with earth pigments. One also had a rudimentary head on which a headdress was mounted. This figure had a central strip of white running from its head to its genital area. It is likely that this strip marked the presence of vital 'grease', of fluid in the body. The second figure had a softwood plaque marked alternately in dark and light colours to resemble the pearl shell ornament hung on the body. It may be thought to have signified the idea of the body as wealth, a significant notion in Pangia. It may also have represented a notched hornbill beak, a favourite design also painted on men's noses at pig-kills (*kaila timini* is the name of this design); each of the *timbu wara* in the South Australian Museum (A.66227, -8) has a real hornbill beak attached as the head (Figure 5).

COMPARATIVE MATERIALS

The *timbu wara* figures are one of a category of objects that are found also in other areas of New Guinea. Heinz Dosedla (1984) has written a review article on this category of woven figures

that are made from flexible materials. He discusses items from the Southern Highlands Province, including the Enga, Kewa and Wiru peoples. His classification, based on a survey of the literature available to him, includes a set of figures that are in the shapes of animals, 100–180 cm in length and decorated with earth pigments; and a second set of anthropomorphic figures, 60–90 cm in height, unpainted, and with an enclosed cavity. For both types, a spiral weaving technique was used in their manufacture, in which plant materials were bent and wound around a supporting frame that was made from stiffer materials, such as bark rope in some instances.

Dosedla states that among the East Kewa of the Kagua District, who had trading relations with both the Enga and Wiru peoples, the woven figures were significant in the cult known as *Rimbu*, which ensured fertility through sacrifices to the dead. The cult included the use of flat woven figures whose construction had been supervised by special ritual experts. These figures resembled those that the Wiru used, but these Kewa figures were in the shape of animals and they were worn by dancers on their lower chests. The figures were said to represent spirits of dead

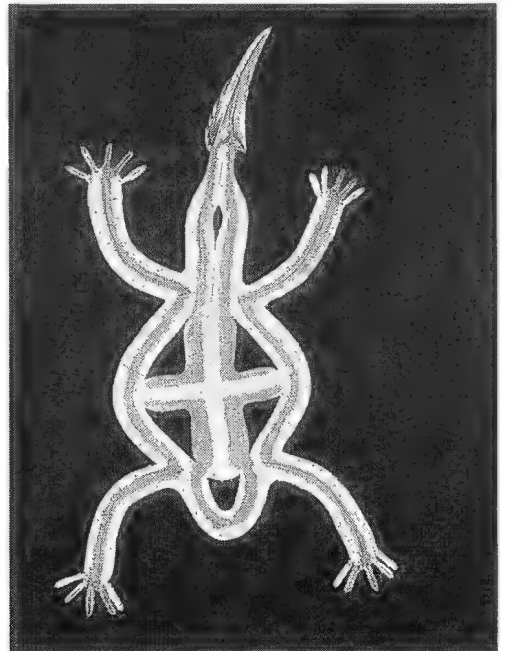


FIGURE 5. Two *Timbu wara* figures in the South Australian Museum (A.66227, -8), each with hornbill beak attached. Purchased from Stephen Kellner of Sydney in 1977. Kellner purchased from a private collector c.1972. Photo courtesy South Australian Museum.

members of the clan. The East Kewa *Rimbu* cult also employed the second category of woven figures—the hollow anthropomorphic ones—which were used as freestanding figures in conjunction with cult stones.

The *Rimbu* cult festival developed over a number of years with several stages of activity and involved two separate groups of men, the 'red' and the 'black' sections. These two colours are symbolically associated elsewhere in the Highlands with dualistic schemes of classification. The 'red' group took control of the anthropomorphic figures and the cult stones, while the 'black' group took control of the animal-shaped figures. The latter were displayed and carried at the end of the ritual by cult participants.

Dosedla also describes wickerwork figures from the Enga area. One type called *yupin* was kept in a special spirit house (*yainanda*, war house) along with cult stones. The *yupin* figure, seen as 'male' and marked by its prominent genitals, was thought to have intercourse with the rounded cult stones, bringing fertility to the land, pigs and humans. (See Wiessner & Tumu 1998: 199, 204, 207 for further details on Enga *yupin* or *yupini* figures.)

Neich (1976) provides a valuable survey of *yupin* figures derived from information provided by an Apostolic Church missionary, H. M. Reah, who lived in the Yandapu Enga area for some ten years in the 1960s and 1970s. Reah's account indicates that these figures were considered very powerful; that they were appealed to in times of drought; that their keepers would ritually place them on top of round flat female stones with holes in the centre; and that groups tended to have their own *yupin* figures. But several groups might come together on an inter-local basis to ask the *yupin* for health and prosperity in times of sickness.

Neich says that *yupin* figures had to be made from special vines (as was true for the *timbu wara* also); that their manufacture was commissioned and the maker rewarded handsomely with shells and axes; and that women and children were not allowed to see them. If a woman saw one, her next child would be born deformed. If a child saw one, he or she would fail to grow.

Here, the logic of time reversal was operating. Seen 'out of time', the *yupin* would harm, not help, the community. Most valuably, Neich provides information from a number of Enga areas, including those that are closer to the Kewa, on variant designs and names of *yupin*. One was from Margarima and was said to represent Tatagali-Wabe or Tali-eli, a major spirit appealed

to when gardens did not grow well. It is interesting to note that this is the name Glasse gave to a supreme spirit among the Huli people (Glasse 1965). The name *yupin* itself may mean 'root or base man', that is 'the source of things'.

All *yupin* figures are cylindrical, with a hollow area inside of them, in contrast with the flat *timbu wara*. While the Enga *yupin* practices and ideas are clearly cognate with the Wiru *wara* customs, the Wiru obviously developed their own ways of thinking about these objects.

Dosedla also briefly describes the Wiru *timbu wara* figures, which he says were painted with concentric rings of white and yellow with a background of red ochre. Such concentric rings are a significant motif for the Wiru. They appear on decorations women made around their navels for dances and in the bands of earth colours painted around the Female Spirit (*Aroa Ipono*) cult stones (Strathern & Stewart 1999b). He notes that they appeared only as the flat type, and not as animal but anthropomorphic forms. He suggests that the Wiru merged two types (the one seen in the East Kewa *Rimbu* cult and the other from the Enga area) into one type; that is, the Wiru figures were flat, not three-dimensional, but represented humans, not animals.

RITUAL AND CHANGE

As Dosedla points out, the Wiru *timbu wara* figures belong to a wider geographical area in which similar figures were made for cult contexts. Dosedla traces the provenance of these figures and analyses their distribution in cultural-geographical terms. For our purposes here, it is important to ask how the Wiru figures were used in the wider contexts of cult and political activity; and also why they so rapidly ceased to be made if they held ritual importance, and what consequences ensued.

The name of these figures is significant. *Wara*, 'spear', refers to the context of warfare and inter-group conflict. The cult performers looked out on the spectators in order to demonstrate their political power and solidarity. *Wara* can also be used to mean 'wealth', the ability to 'kill' objects by paying for them with wealth items, or to obtain wives by the payment of bride price. As the figures represented the human form, they could ambiguously take onto themselves an aura both of the dead ancestors and of the living men who carried them in the festival. Since, among the Wiru, the *Tapa* cult dealt with internal problems

of sickness centered on male ancestors and the Female Spirit cult was concerned with general fertility and alliance, the space occupied by the *Timbu* cult clearly had to do with the outward-looking political strength of settlements.

The decline of the *Timbu* cult thus predictably accompanied the decline in warfare between parishes and hastened the demise of the pre-colonial patterns of inter-parish competition and display, although aspects of these continued in the pig-kills held periodically (Strathern & Stewart 1999a). In addition, as we have seen, some fundamentalist Christian missions in the 1960s were able successfully enough to label cult practices as satanic, and the *timbu wara* figures were prominent and easily visible targets for disapproval, whereas cult stones could more easily be hidden and used still for healing rituals or small sacrifices. The *timbu wara* figures thus disappeared, only to reappear briefly as 'tourist' objects, once emptied of their meaning and dislocated from their political and ritual contexts. Their decline is one of the markers of the success of colonial hegemony, with a trajectory from prime ritual object to tourist object to forgotten piece of knowledge.

Tracing the decline of these sacred figures through time, we have first to note that the major cult leaders were often those who surrendered

their ritual power to the Christian missions in order to get the new ritual power that was on offer. In other words, they themselves in some sense began the process of desacralisation. Mission helpers then took this further by cutting the effigies into pieces, something their custodians themselves would not do because of *ela*. The same mission authorities, along with colonial government officers, completed the process by suggesting the items be made for sale, relying on people's desire for money.

The making of the figures for the Cambridge museum in 1967 pre-dated this process. These figures closely paralleled traditional designs. Those made later, for sale to tourists, showed variations. They were bigger, designed for display on hotel walls; more uniform in color and design; were turned out repeatedly; or were made in the shape of crosses or abstract designs. After Independence in 1975 and the departure of many expatriate missionaries and government officers, the people did not persist with this craft for long. Indeed, the figures were soon in over-supply: the patrol officer's space in the Pangia Station overflowed with them at one time, jumbled up and tangled together in disarray because of insufficient demand for them. As with other matters, the people became disappointed with their returns and ceased production.

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